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Unlike higher-priced fare like *Ellen* and *Steve Harvey*, Tesh's *Intelligence* will cost just \$5 million to roll out.

TV's New Pioneer: John Tesh?!

The former *ET* host returns with an indie play to shake up the syndication model

By Alex Ben Block

WHEN JOHN TESH WALKED AWAY from *Entertainment Tonight* in 1996, he disappeared from the national TV stage. But Tesh never quit working. He has performed 30 or more concerts a year and since 2003 has hosted (with his wife, actress **Connie Sellecca**, and stepson, **Gib Gerard**) a syndicated radio show on about 800 stations billed as *Intelligence for Your Life*.

Now, Tesh, 61, is returning to TV with a daily syndicated talk show, also called *Intelligence for Your Life*, and a business plan designed to tweak the usual syndication model. In an era when the launch of a star-driven talk show like *Katie*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* or *Steve Harvey* can cost \$100 million, Tesh will roll out his show this fall with a bankroll of less than \$5 million to get him through the first year. His L.A.-based TeshMedia is producing and self-distributing, targeting cities where his Christian-themed radio show is popular. "We really are guerilla television," he says.

Intelligence is part of a small group of syndicated shows — including *RightThisMinute*, *America Now* and *The Better Show* — that flies under the radar but competes with higher-profile players by going cheap. **Greg Conklin**, corporate program director for the Gray Television Group, which bought *Intelligence* for five markets this fall, says he will air the show in Omaha, Neb., after the morning news as an alternative to higher-priced chat or court shows. "I see this as a companion to the news," he adds. "The snippets of



information John and Connie will give us we can use in our newscast, and that also promotes the show that follows."

To sell *Intelligence*, Tesh recruited former Paramount TV executive **Mark Dvornik**, who says it will debut this fall even if he can't sign up affiliates in the biggest markets. Dvornik expects to be in 65 percent to 75 percent of U.S. TV homes — including those in Detroit, New Orleans and San Francisco — but probably not in New York or L.A. at launch. The show also will air in 110 smaller markets on The CW.

A model for Tesh is *The Better Show*, owned by Meredith Corp. Now in its eighth season, the info-talk show draws on Meredith's magazines for content, including *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Family Circle*. *Better Show* is up 22 percent in national syndicated ratings this season and airs in New York, L.A. and 75 percent of U.S. TV homes.

As the line between traditional TV and cheap digital content blurs, the demand for low-cost news and information shows could give high-priced talkers a run for their money. "In a real sense, it's the next generation of TV shows," says **Bill Carroll**, vp, director of programming for Katz Media. "It's taking advantage of where the audience is in terms of video content." **THR**